

The University of Chicago

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TEACHING OF FIRST PETER

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF PHILOSOPHY

SEPTEMBER, 1945

By
FRANCIS WRIGHT BEARE

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1. *The Date of the Epistle.* The First Epistle of Peter is now regarded by most scholars as a pseudonymous work written about the end of the first century, in the reign either of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) or of Trajan (98-117 A.D.). It was published in its present form in the provinces of Asia Minor, and was probably composed by a Christian teacher of that region, though it may have been sent from Rome. In my own opinion, the references to persecution in the closing verses of the fourth

chapter correspond so exactly to the description of Pliny's methods as they are set forth in his Letter to Trajan (Book 10, Epistle 96), that we are entirely justified in concluding that it was written at that very time, i.e., 111-112 A.D., and it is quite likely that it had its origin in one of the cities of the province of Bithynia and Pontus. This great region, on the south shore of the Black Sea, was taken from the jurisdiction of the Roman Senate and put under the direct authority of the Emperor at this

time, because Trajan was about to begin a series of great campaigns on his eastern frontier, against the Parthian Empire, and he wished to secure his main lines of communication with the Danubian provinces, which were to provide him with the necessary supplies of food and of re-inforcements; and the main highway between the Danube and the Euphrates ran through the heart of Bithynia. Galatia and Cappadocia were already governed by a legate of the Emperor, and Pliny was now sent out to re-organize the administration of Bithynia and Pontus, and to set everything in readiness for the passage of the Imperial legions which were to be drawn from Europe to humble the pride of Parthia. The peace of this province had frequently been disturbed in the recent past by gangs, organized in the cities, composed of desperate men of the slave class and of the poverty-stricken tradesmen and manual laborers. This sort of thing was endemic—so much so that Trajan actually refused permission to organize a fire-brigade in the capital city of the province on the ground that once such a group was formed, however laudable the purpose, it was practically certain to turn itself into a gang, and to become a danger to the public peace.¹ Pliny, therefore, was particularly determined to root out all such seditious organizations. In Christianity he found numerous groups, drawn almost entirely from the lowest classes, stubbornly refusing to do the customary honor to the Emperor's image, holding secret meetings at daybreak, and carrying on a propaganda which had led to widespread desertion of the temples and to something like a general collapse of

the normal religious life of the province. Though he was unable to find evidence of actual criminal activity, he felt it necessary to do all in his power to stamp out a movement which seemed to him to be "a wicked and arrogant superstition," and he executed all who refused to renounce it and to curse Christ, when they were brought to trial. There is no evidence that a State persecution of this type was undertaken at any earlier period in this area; Pliny's letter itself shows that this experienced official had never in his life been present at the trial of a Christian and had to seek advice about the proper procedure, although he had been in the public service at Rome and in other parts of the Empire for years. It is apparent, too, that there was nothing in the official records of the province to guide him; he had to look to Rome for the necessary advice. These are the considerations, in brief, which incline us to hold that the conditions which called forth First Peter existed in the time of Pliny's tenure of office in Bithynia and Pontus, and not at any earlier period.

2. *The Problem of Authorship.* If this late date be accepted, it follows that St. Peter cannot have been the writer, for there is no reason to reject the tradition that he suffered martyrdom at Rome in the time of Nero, more than forty years earlier. But there are sound reasons for our refusal to accept it as coming from the hand of the Apostle, quite apart from the references to persecution. For one thing, the style and language are those of a man of letters; it contains some of the most polished Greek prose in the New Testament. St. Peter, however, was a Galilean fisherman, brought up speaking a Semitic

¹ Pliny, *Letters*, Bk. 10, 34.

tongue (Aramaic), and he reached middle life without having learned to read and write his native language, let alone Greek (*ἀγράμματος*—Acts 4, 13—not “unlearned,” but actually “illiterate”). Again, the writer of this letter makes continual use of the Pauline Epistles, especially Romans and Ephesians, while he offers no personal reminiscences of Jesus, and only a few echoes of His words. It is impossible to imagine Peter relying upon Paul so much more heavily than upon Jesus. Yet again, this writer is steeped in the Greek translation of the Old Testament; not only does he quote it freely, but its words and its turns of expression come freely to his pen; but there is not a word to indicate that he had ever been a practising Jew, or that the religion of Judaism was a problem to him, as it certainly was to St. Paul. For him, the Old Testament is a Christian book from start to finish, and its significance lies in its testimony to the sufferings that Christ was to bear and the glory that should follow; he never thinks of it as the book of the Law of God, embodying a principle of religion which is now superseded by Grace. Finally, he seems to exhibit an acquaintance with the principles and practices of the Oriental Mystery-cults,² and a tendency to appropriate their technical language for his own Christian purposes, in a manner that suggests a period later than the Apostolic Age and a knowledge that Peter would not have had the means of acquiring. Thus there are many strong reasons for holding that Peter cannot

have been the writer; but it must be said that there is no clue to help us determine who the true author may have been. We can only say that he was probably an elder or bishop of one of the Asiatic churches in the early years of the second century.³

3. *The Composite Structure of the Epistle.* Writing under the name of Peter, then, this unknown teacher sends a message of encouragement and exhortation to the Christians of Asia Minor, to help them stand firm against an outbreak of terrible persecution. But when his letter is analysed, it becomes clear that it was not all written under the shadow of the terror. He has incorporated into it a discourse on the meaning of the Christian life, with some practical directions for Christian conduct in a heathen environment—a discourse that may well have been prepared in the first instance for a band of converts on the occasion of their baptism.⁴ Many of those who were to read the letter had heard him speak to them, perhaps in these very words, on that day when they first professed their faith in Christ and were made members of His Church through the sacrament of regeneration. Now, before he mentions the “fiery ordeal” which has come upon them in all its fury, he repeats the teaching that they had received from his lips in more peaceful days, as if to remind them “that this is the true grace

² R. Perdelwitz, *Die Mysterienreligion und das Problem des ersten Petrusbriefes*, Giessen, 1911. Zweiter Teil, *Das religionsgeschichtliche Problem*. Cf. the commentary of H. Gunkel in *Die Schriften des N.T.*³, Bd. 3, Göttingen, 1917.

³ Streeter's “scientific” guess that the author was Aristion, Bishop of Smyrna, would of course fall to be considered only if the work were taken to belong to the reign of Domitian; it is in any case spun out of gossamer. *The Primitive Church*, New York, 1929, pp. 136 ff.

⁴ See R. Perdelwitz, *op. cit.* Erster Teil, *Das Literarische Problem*. Cf. Streeter, *op. cit.*, pp. 129–130.

of God" (5, 12) and thus to help them to stand steadfast. In the discourse, which occupies the greater part of his letter, there is no explicit reference to persecution such as we find from 4, 12 to the end; but much is said of sufferings unjustly inflicted, and of the example of Christ, who likewise suffered at the hands of men, though He had done no iniquity, and no guile was found on His lips (2, 21 ff.; 3, 18); and all these thoughts would come home to their hearts with new power, now that the storm of evil had broken over their heads. But persecution is not the theme of the discourse; and its fundamental teaching requires to be studied for itself, independently of the situation which called for its publication in writing. The Epistle as it stands, then, falls into two distinct parts; the Baptismal Discourse on "What it Means to be a Christian," extending from 1, 3 to 4, 11; and the epistolary portion proper, written with direct reference to an actual persecution, consisting only of the Salutation (1, 1-2), and of the section from 4, 12 to the end.

4. *The Task of the Christian Teacher.* The Christian Church was cradled in Judaism, and the first followers of Christ were all Jews. In the course of a few years, with much hesitation and in the face of bitter controversy, it embarked upon its historic mission to the Gentiles, first at the Syrian riverain port of Antioch, then at Caesarea and Tarsus and Damascus, and soon afterwards in the island of Cyprus and on the mainland of Asia Minor. Within the lifetime of the Apostles, it was carried all through the cities of the Greek world and into Italy, and perhaps to Egypt and to Spain. During this first

wave of expansion, the Gospel found access to the Gentiles mainly by way of the synagogue, and drew its converts largely from those who had already heard of the One Living and True God, and had been instructed by Jewish teachers in the moral principles of the Old Testament. The synagogues of the Dispersion cultivated the fields, and the Christian mission reaped the harvest. But after the first generation, the Jewish community settled into an attitude of hostility to the Church, and the synagogues were no longer open to traveling preachers, as they had been to St. Paul. Now the mission was compelled to address itself to unadulterated paganism and to seek converts among people who had not received the benefits of the moral and religious instruction that Judaism had to offer. This instruction had now to be provided by the teachers of the Church; they had to take men reared in paganism, and utterly ignorant of any moral principles higher than those of their environment, and to school them in a new way of life. Having won them to the faith of Christ, they had now to teach them what it meant to live as followers of Christ. The discourse of First Peter is our earliest example of the teaching that was given to these converted pagans when they were admitted to membership in the Christian Church.

5. *The Essential Nature of the New Life in Christ.* The Discourse begins with a magnificent exordium (1, 3-11), a paean of praise to God for the gift of life which He has now bestowed upon them. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has regenerated us unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the

dead.” With these words, he teaches them the inward significance of the rite which has just been administered. Baptism is for him no formal ceremony of admission to the Christian society; it is the sacrament of regeneration, wherein God has communicated a new and divine life. As in the thought of St. Paul, the imparting of this new life is connected with the resurrection of Christ. Baptism makes us one with Him; in a symbolic act we die with Him to the old life of earth and are brought by the power of God into a new life of the spirit, centered in heaven. “We are buried with Him through baptism into death, that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk with Him in newness of life” (Romans 6, 4). “If any man be in Christ, there is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold, all things are made new” (2 Corinthians 5, 17). This is the fundamental fact upon which all the teaching of the Discourse is based. With their baptism, the old life of paganism is buried forever, and a new life has begun, a life created within them by God, a life lived in spiritual union with the risen Christ.

As the new life comes from God, so it is directed towards Him in hope and longing. Its affections are set on things above, not on things on the earth. It seeks its fulfilment, not in the sphere of the present, but in the unfolding of God’s purpose in the future. God has begotten us “unto a living hope, unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and unfading, . . . unto a salvation ready to be revealed in the Last Time.” The experience of God’s grace that is given to us here and now is but the earnest of that which is reserved

for us in heaven. The Christian life cannot manifest its whole scope and its ultimate significance in the present; it must constantly view itself in the light of eternity. Therefore, hope lies at its very heart; the horizons of earth are too narrow to contain it, and the utmost possibilities of the present are too limited to give it ultimate satisfaction. “We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4, 18).

This conception of the Christian life as a “living hope” is really twofold. It recognizes the distinction of two realms of being—the visible and the invisible, the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal, the natural and the spiritual; and it holds that the life of the Christian has only a passing and as it were incidental relation to the lower sphere, but an essential and permanent relation to the sphere of the spiritual, the invisible, the heavenly. But it combines with this a parallel recognition of the distinction of two ages—that which now is, and that which is to come; and here again it holds that the life of the Christian is cut loose from the trammels of “this present evil age” (Galatians 1, 4), and belongs essentially to the age to come, the age of the Kingdom. It looks forward to the consummation of God’s purpose in the creation; to a “salvation ready to be revealed,” to “the revelation of Jesus Christ,” when the glory of that higher realm of being will break in upon this sorry mundane scheme of things and transform it into the image of the heavenly. The regeneration which has implanted a new life in the Christian is thus seen as a beginning, a “kind of first fruits”

(James 1, 18) of the regeneration of all things, for which the whole creation waits in hope (Romans 8, 19 ff.). The regenerate man is now linked by faith and love to the Christ who is as yet unseen, and in that communion of spirit he "rejoices with joy unspeakable, and suffused with glory," so that he can be said even now to be "receiving the end of the faith, the salvation of the soul." Yet he looks forward to a future in which faith will be superseded by sight, when things unseen as yet will be made manifest, when "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Isaiah 40, 5). In that hope he accepts the tribulations of the present as tests of the pure metal of his faith, through which he may win the only "praise and honour and glory" which he craves—not that which the world can bestow, but that which is to be given by his Master at His coming.

6. *The New Life as Expressed in Social Intercourse.* Those who have been baptized into the fellowship of Christ must now return to their homes and go about their daily affairs. In the next section of the Discourse, therefore (1, 12-21), he teaches them that the new life which God has implanted in their hearts must issue in a new way of living among men, a transformation in conduct. Though it be predominantly a life of hope, anchored in the unseen and capable of finding its perfect realization only in the future, it must also reflect its divine origin and character in the present, in the temporal and physical circumstances in which they are now placed. Their "conversation" (*ἀναστροφή*), that is, the life which they lead from day to day among their fellows, must not fall into the old pattern of futility which

they inherited from their fathers, when they lived in ignorance of the truth and had no better guide than their own desires. Now they know themselves to be children of God, and obedience to Him must be the rule of all their conduct. He is holy; and His holiness must be their standard, controlling the vagrant impulses of desire. Moreover, the God whom they invoke as Father is also the impartial Judge to whom they must render account; therefore they must live as in His sight, soberly conscious of their responsibility to Him. Finally, he bids them remember the central fact of the Gospel story, that Christ has sacrificed His life to deliver them from their old ways and to bind them to Himself in faith and love. Obedience to God as children to a Father, responsibility to God as to the Judge, and devotion to Christ as to the Redeemer who has purchased them with His blood—these are the foundations upon which he bids them build their life among their pagan neighbors.

In a later part of his Discourse (2, 11-3, 12), he offers more specific instruction in Christian conduct, and suggests yet another motive in the power of a noble life to influence others for good, and to bring them finally to God. The very men who slander Christians as evil-doers may have their eyes opened to the truth when they see the beauty of Christian character exhibited in the lives of those whom they accuse (2, 12), and pagan husbands who refuse to believe the Gospel may be won over without a word as they mark the pure goodness of the Christian wife (3, 1-2).

7. *The New Life in the Christian Community.* After baptism, the converts continue to live in the old social environ-

ment, though new moral principles are to govern their conduct. But they are now brought into the fellowship of another community of a different kind, a brotherhood of those that share their faith. This is the theme to which the writer now turns (1, 22-2, 10). He returns again to the thought of baptism, as the sacrament which effects purification of the inward life and regeneration to immortality; they have "purified their souls," and they have been "regenerated, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, through the living and abiding Word of God." But they are not purified in soul in order to enjoy a solitary holiness, nor are they regenerated of incorruptible seed in order to enjoy a solitary immortality. The Christian teacher here brings forward the remarkable and profound doctrine that the purity and immortality which God bestows issue in the mutual love of the Christian brotherhood. In this social emphasis Christianity stands in marked contrast to all the religions of solitary mysticism, such as Neoplatonism, which seek salvation in a "flight of the alone to the Alone." It has nothing to do with an isolated individualism of experience or of privilege. For the Christian, inward purity in obedience to the truth finds its true expression in "unfeigned love of the brotherhood," and the life that is immortal in its essence is governed by the injunction to "love one another earnestly, from the heart." In Christian thinking, immortality is never conceived in terms of mere duration, apart from the quality and function of the life which is to endure forever. The immortal life which God creates within us through Christ is a life of holiness and love, and it must be lived in the community that God has

formed for it. Thus the most sublime experiences of the soul are linked with the fellowship of all believers; and the higher we are drawn towards God, the closer is our communion with His people.

The nature of this new community and its function in the world are set forth under two figures. It is a "spiritual house," founded upon Christ as the living cornerstone, and built with the lives of His followers, which as "living stones" are set in ordered array about Him, linked by love with Him and with one another. This house is formed "for a holy work of priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God, through Jesus Christ." In these words, he emphasizes that the primary function of the community is worship, and that the heart of its worship lies not in outward ceremonies, but in the offering of "spiritual sacrifices," that is, the perpetual giving of themselves to God, which is the "reasonable service" of all Christians (Romans 12, 1). The second figure represents the Church as the true Israel—the "chosen race" which is in its entirety a "royal priesthood," the "holy nation" that God has taken for His own possession, that it may make known His wonderful works. The once disparate elements, drawn from many different races, are now brought into a wide and deep unity transcending all natural ties and surmounting all the ancient divisions that separate man from man. The basis of the new community is not natural descent or cultural inheritance, but the common experience of God's mercy in regeneration, and the common consecration to His service. There is a boldness in the language which speaks of this society of believers as a *race*, a *nation*, a *people*

(γένος, ἔθνος, λαός), when in literal fact it embraced men of "every race and kindred and people and tongue." Yet it must be remembered that the ancient world always thought of religion as the essential basis both of political community and of racial stock, and regarded common religious observances as the central and determining feature of nationhood. The Christian religion, likewise, was not a private cult, like the pagan mysteries, which an individual might follow at his own pleasure without disturbing his status in his racial or national community. The new relationship to God became at once the determining element of all existence to those who shared it, and brought them into a social unity, rooted in spiritual kinship, which was analogous to the unity of race and nation, but on a scale which extended to embrace all mankind.

8. *Christian Duties in Particular Relationships.* Having laid down the broad general principles and attitudes which are to govern the new life of his converts, the teacher now points out the application of these principles in specific situations (2, 11-3, 12). The first two verses of this section form an introduction, linking the stern moral discipline of the inward life, the restraint of the "fleshly lusts which war against the soul," to the manifested beauty of the outward life "among the Gentiles," which may open the eyes of the most vicious opponents of Christianity, and turn their hearts to God. He then speaks (1) of the Christian attitude to the civil power, (2) of the duty of Christian slaves towards their masters, (3) of the duty of Christian wives to their (pagan) husbands, and (4) of the duty of Christian husbands to their

(Christian) wives. Without going into details, we may observe that he never considers the possibility of radical change in the existing social order. The Roman imperial government, the slave system, the power of the husband over the household—all these things he simply accepts as the framework of life within which his people are called to live. The problem of Christian conduct, as he sets it before them, is not in the least to find ways and means for reforming the present order, but to exhibit true goodness in the midst of a situation fraught with evil and with possibilities of the abuse of power. It is his conviction that the present order is in any case shortly to pass away, to give place to the Kingdom of God, and he has no thought of a Christian attempt to remedy its abuses in the brief time that must elapse before it falls under the judgment of God. In all circumstances, the Christian is to govern his conduct, not upon the kindness or cruelty of those who hold authority over him, but upon his own inward relationship to God. In the fear of God, he will subject himself to authority, in accordance with the existing structure of society. For conscience towards God, he will endure punishment, even when he suffers unjustly. Christ is his example, and he will follow in his Master's footsteps, accepting without rebellion the injustice of men towards himself, and committing himself in patience and faith to "Him that judges justly."

9. *Suffering for Righteousness' Sake.* The most difficult portion of the entire book is the last main section of the Discourse (3, 13-4, 6), in which is set forth the meaning of suffering which a Christian man may have to bear, not because

of wrongdoing, but in spite of innocence. Here we must not be distracted by the intrusion of the curious and fascinating doctrine of the Descent (of Christ, not of Enoch!) into Hades, the Harrowing of Hell, and the preaching of the Gospel to the dead (3, 19-20 and 4, 6). This doctrine brings out, in terms congenial to the thought-world of that time, the Christian belief that the saving work of Christ is not confined to His contemporaries or to the life of earth, but that it embraces all that have lived and all that shall live hereafter, and extends from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven for the redemption of fallen angels as well as fallen man. But the central thought of the passage revolves around its first two sentences—"Who is there that will harm you, if you be full of zeal for the good? But even if you were to suffer for righteousness' sake, blessed would you be." The writer is all but certain that a life lived in whole-hearted devotion to Christian principles will not have to suffer. The Christian may be brought before the Roman magistrate and called to a reckoning for the hope that is in him; but if he makes his defense with tranquil gentleness, in the fear of God and in the strength of a clear conscience, he will put his accusers to shame. It is quite evident that the man who could write in this vein had no experience of a persecution which struck at Christians merely for being Christians (as is implied in 4, 12 ff.); he was confident, rather, that the court would acquit them, once they had shown by their words and demeanour that the charges of evil conduct and of sedition were wholly untrue. But in individual cases, there might be a miscarriage of justice, and a Christian might find himself com-

pelled to suffer punishment "for righteousness' sake." In the face of such a calamity, he is bidden to hold firmly to the conviction that "should the will of God so ordain, it is better to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." The blessedness promised by the Master will be his portion, and he will be comforted and fortified by the recollection that "Christ also suffered for sins (that were not His own), a just man for unjust men, that He might bring us to God"; and that Christ was in the end triumphantly vindicated, when God raised Him from the dead and exalted Him to the highest place in heaven. The sufferings of the righteous were thus revealed as fulfilling the divine purpose and as leading to a divine reward; in Christ, they are vicarious and redemptive, and they end in exaltation to heavenly glory. Like St. Paul, the writer of this Epistle reckoned "that all the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8, 18).

But in a more profound approach to the problem, he turns again to the thought of baptism as a dying with Christ and rising with Him to newness of life, as St. Paul had expounded it in Romans 6. "As Christ has suffered in the flesh, do you arm yourselves with the same mind" (4, 1). Here the phrase *παθόντος σαρκί* (having suffered in the flesh) is used in place of the *θανατωθεὶς σαρκί* (put to death in the flesh) of 3, 18,—not to weaken it, but to connect the thought more directly with the problem of suffering, which is the immediate theme. "As Christ died, do you reckon yourselves dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God" (Romans 6, 11). The conception (*ἐννοια*) which will be an invulnerable armour to them

is the acceptance of the sentence of death within themselves (1 Corinthians 1, 9), the mental apprehension of the moral and spiritual experience of crucifixion with Christ. Suffering, however terrible, cannot be an ultimate terror to those who already "reckon themselves dead," for whom the life in the flesh is but an interim of pilgrimage in an alien land, while the true life which alone they treasure is the life of the spirit, the life that no persecutor can touch because it is "hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3, 4). It is in this sense that he unfolds the thought of the strong phrase, "baptism now saves you . . . through the resurrection of Jesus Christ"; for in baptism the old life is already given over to death, and the new life is lived in the power of the resurrection, so that death cannot touch it. He that truly understands the faith into which he has been baptized will not fear "them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do."

The baptismal discourse ends with a final comprehensive exhortation to mutual love and service, culminating in a doxology (4, 7-11). Let us observe that in its whole course, there is not a single allusion to a persecution that is actually raging; there is nothing more than a general preparation for trouble that may at any time have to be faced by Christians in a non-Christian world.

10. *The Letter to the Persecuted—The Salutation.* But this Discourse, as it has come down to us, is embodied in a letter, and the letter is full of allusions to an acute situation of unspeakable terror. Even the formal words of the Salutation (1, 1-2) reflect this atmosphere of tension. Writing now under the name of Peter, the pastor addresses

his threatened people as "elect sojourners of dispersion." In this strange phrase, he brings before their minds a picture of their true situation in a world hostile to them and to the cause for which they stand. They are a Dispersion, like the scattered colonies of Israel, living far from the land of hope and promise. For the time being, they cannot dwell in their true homeland, but they never forget the "Jerusalem which is above," and they are never unmindful of their allegiance to the unseen land where their Master dwells, wherein they hold their true and ultimate citizenship. Upon the earth, they are but sojourners, never feeling that this is their final abiding-place, never truly at home in its social structure, never settling down within it as permanent residents. Their life puts down no roots in the transitory soil of this present world, for it is deep-rooted in the things of eternity. All this is suggested by the phrase "sojourners of dispersion." The word which we render "elect" adds a further element in the picture. In ordinary usage, this word had none of the theological weight which we attach to it. It was used in the sense of "select," "choice," "of high quality." This sense is conveyed here also. The "sojourners of dispersion" are choice souls, rare spirits, picked warriors, who can be counted on to be true to their Master amid perils of torture and of death. But in the vocabulary of Christian teaching, the word undoubtedly takes on the deeper sense of the divine election, the decree of God's eternal will, which has set them in this place of trial and of responsibility. The conviction that they were no playthings of blind fate, but men on whom God had laid His mighty hand for good, was a constant inspiration and

strength to men who lived in jeopardy, facing ordeal by fire, and with no earthly refuge or support.

This thought of the will and purpose of God working itself out in the life of His people, even in the extremity of their sufferings, finds powerful expression in the threefold phrase of the next verse. "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctification of the Spirit, unto the obedience and blood-sprinkling of Jesus Christ."⁵ If they are called to live in danger, under the shadow of persecution and the threat of death, they are now reminded that it is not because God has forgotten them or that He has ceased to love. He is still the Father, who knows all things from the beginning, who has known them for His own before He laid the foundations of the universe; and in that mysterious foreknowledge which is nothing else than the predetermining of His purpose of fatherly love, He has seen fit to lead them through this path of trial. His Spirit is still with them to sanctify them, so that they will be purified and not broken by the ordeal through which they pass. And the end of it all is that they are brought "unto the obedience and blood-sprinkling of Jesus Christ." The words look back to the covenant made between Jehovah and Israel in the solemn rite described in Exodus 24, when Moses sprinkled the assembled people with the blood of sacrifice, and they vowed to be obedient. Even so the blood of Jesus Christ, of-

fered in sacrifice, has become the seal of an everlasting covenant between God and all that believe. But there is in the words the further thought that God is now calling them to share in the obedience and in the sufferings of His Son. As He was "obedient unto death, even the death of Cross," so they are now called to have part in the same high destiny, that they may be united with Him in the fellowship of His sufferings, and at the last, in the fellowship of His glory. The Salutation concludes with the prayer that grace and peace may be multiplied unto them,—that even in the midst of persecution they may be sustained by an increasing measure of the power and love of God, and that the peace which He bestows may not be disturbed by the experience of the worst that men can do.

11. *The Message to the Persecuted.* The Salutation is followed immediately by the great discourse to the baptized, which we have already studied. Then, with the twelfth verse of chapter four, we find ourselves plunged at once into the tensely anxious days of the first terrible wave of persecution, when the Christian congregations of Asia are bewildered to find themselves suddenly subjected to a fiery ordeal of inquisition, torture, and death. Eager to comfort and strengthen them that they may rally from the fearful shock and stand firm, the writer bids them not to be astounded, as though some strange thing were happening. As followers of Christ, they are made partakers of the sufferings which He Himself endured; and by this recollection, the ordeal of persecution is transmuted into a source of spiritual joy, in the experience of a deeper communion with the Crucified, and in a

⁵ The words have every appearance of an interpretative expansion of the baptismal formula; thus they suggest at the outset the thought that the sufferings which the Asian Christians are enduring are to be viewed in the light of the vows which they took at baptism, and the experience of God's power which they then began to receive.

quickened anticipation of the glory to which this path of suffering leads. Men revile them because they name the name of Christ, but this very reviling brings upon them the blessedness that their Master had promised (Matthew 5, 11), for the heavenly presence of the Spirit of God encompasses them with the glory of the divine. But, he warns them, no Christian should afford a genuine justification for the punishments inflicted by the persecuting power, by committing any crime. Such a warning, he felt, was necessary, for many of his people were drawn from among the slaves and the very poor, the submerged classes that easily fell into criminal practices and might now be driven to the worst excesses through sheer despair. But if the punishments of the law should fall upon them, not for any wickedness, but for their loyalty to Christ, let them not feel disgraced at being cast into jail or led off to execution; let them on the contrary glorify God by faithfulness to the holy Name for which they suffer. The havoc and terror of the persecution are so appalling that he is driven to look upon this as the first impact of the Last Judgment. If God then causes His own household of faith to pass through such an ordeal, how much more terrible will be the fate of the wicked when He comes to deal with them? The great Creator is Himself the only Refuge, and those who suffer in accordance with His will may commit their souls to Him in confidence that He will be faithful to their trust.

The Epistle continues (5, 1 ff.) with a special word of exhortation to the leaders of the local communities of Christians, on whom the heaviest responsibility was bound to fall in a time

of crisis. The elders are given commission as shepherds, to feed the flock of God and to set the example of constancy, seeking no earthly reward for their services and claiming no right of mastery over their people, but content to await the Master's praise and the imperishable reward which He will bestow when He manifests Himself in glory. The younger people are urged to follow this faithful leadership of the elders, not putting themselves forward with impatient zeal. For young and old alike, the watchword is to be πάντες ἀλλήλοις—"all for one another"—each seeking to be the servant of all.

The exhortations of the following paragraph (vv. 6-11) all seek to lift their thoughts to God that they may see in their present troubles the working of His mighty hand, and may be disciplined in the spirit of humility which alone opens the way to the exaltation of a more intimate communion with Him. They are assured again of His unfailing care, and bidden to cast upon Him the burden of their anxiety. All these persecutions are instigated by the devil; but by steadfast faith in God they may resist and foil him. They must not imagine that Asia alone is feeling the force of the storm; the Christian brotherhood all over the world is undergoing a like experience of persecution. Finally, they are reminded that while the sufferings are fleeting, the glory to which they are called is eternal and divine. God Himself will strengthen and sustain them, and keep them true to Himself.

The mention of Mark and Silvanus and of Rome (Babylon) in the closing greeting is in keeping with the pseudonym which the writer has chosen. The

two companions of St. Paul were, like St. Peter himself, by this time in their graves; and there is no evidence that the letter was known at Rome or anywhere else in the West until the third century.⁶ Distance alone would make it unlikely that it could have been sent from Rome. A letter of this character would hardly be sent by the Imperial postal service!—and private communications were slow in the ancient world, even with all the good routes created by Rome. We do not sufficiently appreciate the physical difficulty in the way of imagining a correspondence between Rome and the Asian provinces rapid enough to permit an effective response to an acute situation which had arisen at such a distance. It might be of some help, if we were to remember how long it took St. Paul to travel from Caesarea to Rome, even though he was in the hands of a military guard which was in a position to requisition transportation as it was needed. Under such circumstances, several months might easily pass after the outbreak of persecution in Asia before word of it reached Rome, and it would take an equally long time to send back a letter of exhortation and encouragement. It is far more likely, therefore, that this letter originated somewhere in the area to which it is addressed, than that it came from the distant capital of the Empire.

⁶ The one exception is Irenaeus, and he came to Gaul from Asia Minor, perhaps bringing a copy of the Epistle with him.

12. *The Value of the Epistle.* The date, the authorship, and the place of origin of this Epistle are open to question, and many points of interpretation remain matters of debate. Its value to the Church, fortunately, is not in the least dependent on the settlement of these problems of criticism. Whoever the author and whatever the date, the Epistle lies before us as a unique and precious heritage from the first age of our Christian brotherhood. It has a living message for every age in which men seek to live in and for Christ in the midst of a non-Christian world; for it sets forth the high themes of regeneration and immortality, of holiness and love, of humility and submission and perseverance in well-doing, of communion with Christ in life and in death, in the pathway of suffering and in the promise of eternal bliss. And its words take on a new glow of hope and strength in days when the concentration camp, the torture chamber, and the death cell again threaten the man who bears faithful testimony to the truth which he has received. "Rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings." "Blessed are ye, for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." "The God of all grace, who hath called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, will Himself make you perfect and steadfast, and will strengthen you and fix you on a firm foundation. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."

